

Survival of the fittest

For the past 11 years, Staff Sgt. Alan Pratt has not had his Air Force job put to the test.

That tears at him a bit. He longs to verify the equipment he maintains will work and the training he gives will make a difference. But to find that out, someone will have to bailout from or abandon a KC-135 Stratotanker. He doesn't want that to happen — but he still wonders.

"It will make all I do worth it if an aircrew member has to use my equipment, then returns, pats me on the back and says, 'Sergeant Pratt, thank you. Good job. I'm still walking,'" he said.

The aircrew life support specialist may never hear those words, and he's OK with that. It doesn't distract him from his duties. Each day he inspects, maintains and tweaks the life support and survival gear he manages. And he keeps his aircrews up to date on how to survive anywhere.

But Sergeant Pratt is sure the equipment — helmets, parachutes, life rafts, radios and other survival gear — will pass the test. And he's sure the training he provides will pay off. After all, he's qualified to maintain all the equipment and has been to every survival course — like arctic, tropical, desert and water — the Air Force offers. He also accomplished parachute training.

Aircrews at the 351st Air Refueling Squadron have the same training, but rely on Sergeant Pratt for the updates. So he stays busy learning "all he can to help keep aircrews alive," he said.

"Because they'll call you out when they think you are blowing smoke," Sergeant Pratt said. "I must be sure. Because if they have to bail out at 10,000 feet and their parachute doesn't open, then it's all over for them."

But since the Stratotanker has a good safety record, keeping aircrews focused on something they've trained on or heard a million times isn't easy. So the sergeant throws himself into his lectures with all the enthusiasm he can muster. He knows his job and equipment inside out.

"The challenge is making aircrews understand that one day they may have to use this stuff," Sergeant Pratt said. "So if I'm not hyped-up and excited about what I do, I'll lose them."

And in the sergeant's line of work that's unacceptable.

by Louis A. Arana-Barradas

photo by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

Staff Sgt. Alan E. Pratt

Aircrew life support specialist

351st Air Refueling Squadron

Royal Air Force Mildenhall, England

Years in Air Force: 11

Hometown: Goldsboro, N.C.

Number of aircrew life support specialists: (1T1X1): 1,617

"I maintain life support equipment, so tanker aircrews depend on me. Because if they have to bail out at 10,000 feet and their parachute doesn't open up, that's it for them."